

TESTIMONY - Karla Bowling**Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, and Public Lands****Hearing on H.R. 2238****Thursday, October 18, 2001**

Good Morning, My name is Karla Bowling; I am the Executive Director of the Bell County Chamber of Commerce. I am here to represent the citizens of Middlesboro, Kentucky, to lend support for House Resolution 2238 authorizing the Secretary of the Interior to acquire Fern Lake and the surrounding watershed for addition to Cumberland Gap National Historical Park.

First of all, let me say that it is truly an honor to be asked to appear before you today in this small, yet significant role in our democratic process. I appreciate the service you provide to the citizens of our country and especially the unity you have shown that has become a model for the rest of our nation.

The initiative that brings us here today would accomplish several objectives and strike a delicate balance in promoting the interests of business and economic development while at the same time protecting our precious natural resources.

Far from just helping the citizens of Middlesboro, acquiring Fern Lake would benefit the entire region and I would venture to say the hundreds of thousands of tourists who visit our part of the country each year.

This piece of legislation would help us to further capitalize on the breathtaking beauty of our natural resources through tourism initiatives, preserve and protect the environment, and increase the economic viability of our people. From my perspective as a Chamber of Commerce Director, it almost seems too good to be true. But taken piece by piece, it is logical and makes great business sense. Allow me to briefly address some of these points.

About five years ago, the lake and adjacent watershed was auctioned and purchased by a local coal company. The company applied for permits to mine the coal on the watershed, but these permits were denied due to the inability to ensure that the water supply would be protected. It was at this time that the city and the park became acutely aware of how vulnerable that piece of property was. Protecting the integrity of the water as well as the beauty of the viewshed from the adjacent park overlook would prove to be a daunting task.

Acquiring the land and incorporating it into the National Park would ensure that the water supply would be protected for generations to come. Our Congressman has made great progress in Kentucky to bring potable water to rural areas. We must not regress and threaten this water source for the more than 20,000 residents who depend on Fern Lake for their sole supply of fresh, clean water. Our land, our people, and our natural resources are too precious to leave unprotected.

Not only is our water supply important to our citizens, but it is crucial to the viability of some of our area's largest employers. Cumberland Gap Provision Company produces ham products and also manufactures Highlander Ice - both with a retail base reaching across America. Water purity is imperative in the curing, smoking, and packaging processes. It goes without saying that the purity of the local water supply greatly effects the taste of all of their products. These two companies employ more than 375 people and have recently invested more than \$14 million to expand their facilities. Another company that depends on a quality water supply is Middlesboro Coca-Cola Bottling. These companies are significant contributors to the local economy and quality of life for our citizens. We can't afford to jeopardize the livelihood of our city's

largest employers and most importantly the families that rely on these good-paying jobs.

Acquisition of this land also makes sense when addressing the need to generate Park revenues. Profit from the sale of water to the local water utility is approximately \$85,000 per year. Money could be earmarked to go back into Cumberland Gap National Historical Park to be used for trail maintenance, facilities upkeep, recreational needs, staffing, and other related expenses.

Now on to the issue of promoting additional recreational opportunities and eco-tourism. In the fast-paced, stressful world we live in today, many tourists are looking for a way to "get away from it all". They are looking for a quiet respite from their cares and worries, simple vacations, a reconnection with nature, and a return to simplicity. More and more Americans are looking for the kind of getaway that the Fern Lake property could provide if properly developed

The recreational possibilities are endless and could all be in keeping with the ecologically sound parameters set forth by National Park guidelines. In fact, the lake already functions as a small private fishing and boating club, where a modest pavilion is used for various community activities including weddings, family reunions, and picnics. Future plans could include a lodge to accommodate corporate retreats, business and government conferences, a wildlife or waterfowl observatory, fitness and nature trails, youth camps, scouting, and other amenities that could be promoted to bring in additional tourism and recreational revenues.

The National Park is the third most visited attraction in our state. Tourism is the third largest industry in Kentucky, bringing in revenues of almost \$9 billion annually. Although the nation as a whole is experiencing a decline in tourism as a result of the tragic events of September 11th, we expect to maintain, if not increase our tourism share because of the rural nature of tourist destinations in our region. In fact, in the past month we have had an influx of visitors and inquiries for tourist information packets from places such as Tampa, Atlanta, Cincinnati, New York, New Orleans, Nashville, Asheville, and Jacksonville, to name just a few.

Tourism revenues have the potential to play a significant role in the reversal of our economic decline in Appalachia. We work extremely well with our National Park and share a similar vision of how to promote our heritage and expand tourism.

In closing, let me make one last point. As you stand at the Pinnacle Overlook, you are at 2,660 feet above sea level - the highest point above the Cumberland Gap. Fern Lake and the untouched beauty of the mountains surrounding it are an integral part of the breathtaking view that lies before you. I imagine this is similar to what our ancestors saw as they stood in this spot hundreds of years ago. As far as the eye can see, the pristine beauty of our heritage surrounds you. We cannot take the chance of losing this precious resource. In the past, we have made the mistake of not protecting our environment and the natural beauty it provides to nourish our souls.

This is a wonderful opportunity. Seldom do we see such synergy between economic development, tourism, and the preservation of our natural resources.

Thank you for your time.

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